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Wolfgang Merkel

Trump, the Right-Wing Populists, and Democracy

When asked not long ago whom he would vote for on November 8, 2016, if he were an American, he replied unhesitatingly: »Trump. I am just horrified about him, but Hillary is the true danger.« »He« in this case is not just anybody; he is Slavoj Žižek, *the* neo-Marxist philosopher of the last decade, and a pop star of the Internet. We can assume that Žižek could only have been horrified by his own bold endorsement the morning after the election.

In the meantime the unspeakable has happened: Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States. The New York billionaire, serial declarer of bankruptcy, chauvinist, sexist, the man with the baseball cap and the bad manners, a bigmouthed »Me Inc.« is now the most important politician of the (Western) world. Will he change the world in such disastrous ways as his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, did during his presidency? What lessons can we learn about the state of democracy in America from the campaign, the elections, and Trump's political program? Is Trump a uniquely American phenomenon, or is the United States once again holding up a mirror to the Europeans, showing them what their future

will look like, as Alexis de Tocqueville put it in his classic, *Democracy in America*? Is Trump's electoral victory the revolt of those who have long felt unrepresented by the establishment, the »political class,« the media, public discourses, and an economic system that constantly generates more inequality? Is right-wing populism now arcing across the Atlantic, too?

Prominent theorists of post-democracy from Colin Crouch to Jacques Rancière offer, among others, one crucial argument: in the post-democratic age, elections have deteriorated into an empty ritual. They simulate democracy rather than constituting its core element. Substantive matters play no role, or – if they do – the programs put forth by the putative political »rivals« have become indistinguishable. Like so many of the arguments advanced by theorists of post-democracy, this one is only half true. Indeed, neither the political programs presented in pre-election speeches nor those reported by the media carried much weight. What dominated the 2016 presidential campaign was mudslinging, i.e., personal attacks by one candidate against the other. »Crooked Hillary,« corrupt Hillary; she doesn't belong in the White House; she should be locked up in prison; she lies, she deceives; she and her husband are enriching themselves, earning millions by mixing up the activities of their charitable foundation with personal speaking engagements by Bill Clinton in Qatar or by Hillary to representatives of Wall Street. The Democratic candidate gave as good as she got: »Donald« was/is a sexist, racist, and chauvinist who harasses women, insults Muslims, makes fun of handicapped people, calls Latin American immigrants rapists, discriminates against African Americans »just like his father,« and chronically evades taxes. There is little doubt that the American political campaigns of 2016 did indeed mark a historic nadir for democratic elections.

Where the post-democratic speculation misses the mark is in its claim that there are no differences between the programs on offer. In point of fact, the platforms of Clinton and Trump did differ substantially. Trump adopted old neo-liberal formulas: cut taxes so that the investors will invest; get the economy growing and then jobs will come back from Mexico, China, Japan, or Europe. His proposals echo the famous napkin sketch drawn by Ronald Reagan's chief economist, Arthur Laffer, early in Reagan's first term, to convince the late president that tax cuts not only would boost investment and GDP, but would also bring more revenue into government coffers. George W. Bush, another economic layman, followed the same seductive recipe a decade later. In both cases, those policies led to the largest increases in public debt that American democracy has seen to date. And now comes Donald Trump. A tragedy of fiscal policy looks as though it will be followed by a farce. In this instance Trump will be adopting plans that presumably collide with the economic interests of the (white) working class that he »discovered.« In this respect, at least for now, he is not following the more recent trend among European right-wing populists, who have frequently moved away from their neo-liberal origins and gradually embraced social-nationalist programs.

Trump's proposals on foreign trade will elicit confusion even if they do not provoke a trade war. In President Trump's simplistic, Republican-populist view of the world, it is China, Europe, and the »disastrous« NAFTA treaty that have been steal-

ing American jobs. Free trade agreements should be rolled back and punitive tariffs should be slapped on products from Asia and Europe if they don't conform to the economic ideas of the USA. It is this bizarre mishmash of neo-liberal tax-cutting and deregulation at home coupled with protectionist threats aimed at foreign countries that the billionaire is offering to his countrymen and threatening to impose on the rest of the world. Trump's plans for economic policymaking are squarely in accord with the national-protectionist programs of most right-wing populist parties.

In the United States the social welfare state is underdeveloped. There are historical reasons for this fact: the sanctity of private property, the ideology of the minimal state, the weakness of labor unions, the absence of a workers' party, and the dominance of an especially crude, untrammelled version of capitalism. So it was considered one of the great successes of Barack Obama's first term in office that – despite the rabidly obstructionist policy of the Republican opposition – the President was able to offer health insurance even to low-income Americans through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010). By contrast, to Trump the Affordable Care Act (aka »Obamacare«) is nothing but a disaster. Consequently, backed by his supporters, Trump and the Congressional Republicans are now attempting to roll back even this modest effort at social-welfare-state reform. Thus, he is again showing his true colors as a neo-liberal resister of the social welfare state.

The biggest question marks concern foreign policy. Initially, Trump said little about what his policies would be, partly because he was a novice, and partly because he probably did not want to give away his negotiating positions in advance. But now, after several months in office, he has made his priority clear: »America first.« Trump sees international relations as a zero sum game. Hence, he wants to use American power to intimidate and outmaneuver other countries, especially in trade deals which he regards as his area of expertise. He has little use for notions of international cooperation, compromise, and »win-win« policies. Instead, he believes that if the United States is tough enough, it will get what it wants by sheer bullying. After all, he assumes, other countries need the USA more than it needs them. That is the reason why he has already jettisoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, threatened to tear up the Paris Climate Accord, and opined that NATO may be »obsolete.« Likewise, he has undermined the United States' bilateral relationships with key allies and friends. He insulted and humiliated Mexico, shocked the Australians by threatening to renege on an agreement to take some refugees from them, and alienated many Arab countries by promising to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Imperial Overstretch

Things could get uncomfortable for China and Europe. The United States already has asked Europe to contribute more toward NATO financing, arms procurement, and military operations. Moreover, Trump may double down on another favorite trick of American industrial policy: initiating lawsuits against European (German) firms. Likewise, it remains to be seen whether Trump will try to fight back against China's authoritarian-statist policies on merchandise and capital exports. Even before taking office, Trump appeared to question the »one China« policy, a move

that does not bode well for the stability of international relations. And, in a quite undiplomatic way, he has opened several new fronts in foreign policy. Amid all this the USA might learn what imperial overstretch means.

Donald Trump won the election, at least in the sense that he won a majority in the Electoral College. In addition, the Republicans now have majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Finally they control governorships in a majority of states and both chambers of 31 state legislatures (a key issue since governors and state legislatures draw electoral district boundaries). What enabled Trump and the GOP to win were the semi-democratic »winner takes all« or »first-past-the-post« electoral system combined with the archaic Electoral College, in which state-by-state electoral votes rather than the overall national popular vote determine the outcome. Like Al Gore against George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton received a slim majority of the popular vote (a margin of 2.7 million votes), but her victory was transformed into a defeat by the Electoral College system, in which she won only 232 electoral votes versus Trump's 306. Voter participation in the Presidential elections was 59.8 % of eligible voters over 18 years of age (a statistic that excludes many otherwise eligible felons who are barred from voting – in some states for life): not impressive but much higher than the voter participation rate usually is in midterm Congressional elections (e.g., 2014), when 35 % is considered a good turnout.

Pippa Norris, a renowned scholar at Harvard who studies democracy and voting, has been investigating the integrity of elections in democracies and autocracies for many years. Of 153 countries studied, the United States ranks only 52nd, an extremely poor outcome. Germany is in seventh place, while countries such as Croatia, Greece, Argentina, Mongolia, and South Africa all rank ahead of the USA. There are several reasons for the questionable integrity of American elections: the enormous influence of wealthy private donors upon campaigns and electoral programs, the frequent use of »gerrymandering« (the manipulative redrawing of electoral district boundaries to favor one party), a system of voter registration that effectively discriminates against African Americans and lower-class citizens, extremely low turnout for Congressional elections, the first-past-the-post-system itself, and the shamefully inadequate number of polling places given America's level of technology and economic power. Long lines outside polling places, much as one might see in a country like Bangladesh, now define the familiar public image of American elections.

American democracy is known for its elaborate checks and balances. Controls exercised by one branch of government over the powers of the others are especially well developed: Congress and the executive branch (the Presidency) may be controlled by different parties; the American federal government has a relatively weak position vis-à-vis the states within the federal system itself; and the Supreme Court possesses broad powers of constitutional interpretation. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful such bodies in the world. However, for the time being Congress's ability to check the executive branch will be fairly limited if Trump manages to mend fences with the Republican establishment and unite the GOP behind him. Still, the Republican majority in the Senate is a relatively slim 52-48, so that chamber may not always

support his initiatives. But when it comes to making appointments to the federal courts, including one vacancy on the Supreme Court, Trump made it clear during the campaign that he would nominate a hand-picked conservative Justice, which he has done by choosing Neal Gorsuch of Colorado. The Senate Republican majority will not want to pass up a chance to shape the Court in a conservative direction for years to come. Yet Supreme Court nominees have to be confirmed by a qualified majority of 60 Senators, which means that at least eight Democrats would have to vote for Trump's pick or that the GOP leadership will have to change the rules of the Senate such that a simple majority would suffice to confirm Gorsuch and any other future Supreme Court nominees (this is called the «nuclear option»). The current alignment of political forces places fewer limits on President Trump than were intended by the Constitution. Indeed, he may have a freer hand than any Republican President has enjoyed since the 20s. The «mainstream media» (as Trump calls them) and watchdogs in civil society will have to take on a vital checking function. But no one should expect to see a push toward greater democratization or tolerance in American democracy over the next few years.

Trump: a right-wing populist?

Is Trump really a right-wing ideologue or is merely a demagogic, populist seducer who can be tamed by institutions, his advisors, and public opinion once he is in office? During the campaign, Trump often was portrayed as relatively immune to the influence of his advisors. But this perception has changed now that Steve Bannon, the white nationalist ex-director of the «alt-right» website Breitbart News, seems to have become Trump's alter ego, having gotten access even to all meetings of the National Security Council, which even the Director of National Intelligence and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are not always invited to attend. Meanwhile, the available institutional checks on Trump will not work as well as «pure» Constitutional theory teaches in an age of ascendant populism and with a majority in Congress willing to support the President. Trump's appointments to important cabinet posts, however, suggest a tilt toward crude, neo-liberal big business policies rather than a social-populist agenda. Thus, the more important question is: Who are the voters behind Trump? What do they signify for democracy? Preliminary voting studies indicate that he peeled away a majority of the white working class from the Democrats. In the final analysis, the voters who propelled Trump to victory seem to have been older, less-educated white males in the rust belt, rural areas, and the suburbs of metropolitan areas. They have been the losers in economic globalization and fall into the bottom half of the American economic hierarchy. Their real wages have stagnated for two decades, and nothing President Obama's Democratic administration did was able to change that. They belong to an element of the American population that feels demographically, culturally, and economically threatened and has turned its back on Democratic policies perceived to favor the middle and even upper strata. But we might very well doubt whether their economic situation was the factor that drove their voting choices. To revise one of Bill Clinton's famous slogans: It's *not* the economy, stupid! The white workers and less educated voters didn't

refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton because they failed to hear her message. They voted against her because they did hear it. Clinton waged a campaign focused on issues of identity: for women, African Americans, Latinos, immigrants, homosexuals and transsexuals. But she had no message for the white workers and lower classes. In plain words: Policies toward minorities play an important role in a democracy. In the aloof debates carried on by the cultural and political establishment and amid the omnipresent moral indignation about even minor offenses against carefully monitored rules of correct speech, cosmopolitan Democrats came to represent moral arrogance, and that is why they lost contact with the less educated classes in the country.

There are parallels between the outcome of the U.S. election and the reciprocal interactions currently taking place between social democratic parties in Western and Eastern Europe and their right-wing populist counterparts. Social democrats are by now thoroughly pervaded by the middle class and its values, and have redesigned their programs to appeal to that group. Established political forces, the media, progressives, the better-off, and the chorus of »rational« people are frequently satisfied with representing their own interests and their own version of cultural modernity. And when they hear conservative fears about »the loss of home,« of a certain urban neighborhood, of a familiar culture, the nation and its sovereignty, the meaning of borders, or the redefinition of marriage, they often do not respond with persuasive arguments. Instead, they lecture to and, not infrequently, exclude from the sphere of public discourse all those who have expressed such »politically incorrect« ideas. Discourses have been dominated by a cosmopolitan and excessively moralistic spirit. For example, supporters of Brexit were written off as relics of yesteryear who do not understand the brave new world of cosmopolitanism and supra-nationalism. By the same token, those who vote for right-wing populist parties are dismissed as the moral, cognitive, and cultural troglodytes of our societies. In Western Europe, political entrepreneurs have cultivated these »left-behind« elements, winning the allegiance of anywhere between 10 and 30 % of eligible voters for their cause or party. In Poland and especially in Hungary, right-wing populism has already given evidence of its ability to win majority support. And now it's the turn of the United States, the pre-eminent power of the democratic West. But not all Trump voters are anti-democratic racists, sexists, and chauvinists. What should arouse concern is the fact that it helped rather than hindered Trump when he was still a candidate to go before the public spouting intolerant slogans against the establishment, the »political class in Washington,« and »those at the top,« and in favor of »change.« A symptom of this disconnect was the final rally that the Democrats held just before the election, on November 7, 2016 in Philadelphia. It featured Barack and Michelle Obama, former President Bill Clinton, Bruce Springsteen and Jon Bon Jovi, an impressive »A-list« of establishment figures to have on stage. But a majority of Pennsylvania voters opted for Donald Trump, the outsider.

The better off and established members of our civil and political society have grown placid, smug, and deaf to the voices of those who are »at the bottom« whether in an economic or cultural sense. They are defending things as they are, including

their own privileges. The right has taken over the erstwhile battle cries of the left: the critique of elites and the privileged, the challenge to the status quo, and the call for change. The working class has gone over to the right-wing populists on both sides of the Atlantic. That is one reason why Donald Trump's victory should be regarded as a warning shot. A representative democracy needs to represent everyone, or as close to it as possible. It has to allow for even reactionary or conservative criticism outside the bounds of political correctness. Once again, it must take seriously issues of economic and cultural distribution. Moreover, if social democrats want to be understood by the lower classes again, they will have to rein in their schoolmasterly language with its stock of politically correct ideas that have ever shorter half-lives. None of this implies that they have to stop fighting for freedom, equality, and cultural modernizations of the last few decades. Nor must they abandon important aspects of cosmopolitanism. On the contrary, those rights do have to be defended. But they are not the be-all and end-all of policymaking. Lectures from above, moral intransigence, or the discursive exclusion of »unrepresentable« and »irrational« people and opinions destroy the bond between social democrats and the less privileged members of our society. And that does nothing but play into the hands of right-wing populists.



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